

Well Done, Duishen!

I headed my article with these words when I wrote about Chinghiz Aitmatov's story, *Duishen*, immediately after its appearance. Today, too, it seems impossible to express my attitude and my feelings towards the hero of this outstanding work in any other way.

Well done, Duishen!

What exactly did Duishen do? Nothing in particular, it would appear. Only that he was the first to teach children the alphabet in a distant Kirghiz village sixty years ago, he was the first to tell them about Lenin, and that he snatched his pupil, fourteen-year-old Altynai, who yearned for learning and life, from the hands of kidnappers who wished to marry her off by force, and himself nearly died doing this...

But all this was a long time ago, and Duishen today is an elderly, lonely man, the village postman. We do not even see the Duishen of today in the story. We only hear the clatter of his horse outside the windows of the school principal's home. Duishen's outstanding countrymen, including Academician Altynai Sulaimanova, have gathered for the opening of the new secondary school, and Duishen the postman has brought congratulatory telegrams for the participants in the celebration, which he sends in with a boy, without going in.

The boy says of Duishen, "He spurred the horse on all the way here, wanting to be on time for the meeting and to read out the telegrams to the people here. Our old man was just a little late, and he arrived disappointed."

One person suggests calling in Duishen, but then someone else protests: why should they sit around with old men? And another person raises his glass to eye-level, squints, and says with a touch of ridicule: "Comrades, once upon a time we were pupils, if anyone remembers, in Duishen's school. And yet he himself probably didn't know all the letters of the alphabet."

Someone takes this up: "You're not kidding! What didn't Duishen try to do then! And we took him seriously as a teacher!"

Heads nod, and these respected, self-satisfied people with such short memories smile and gibe at their former teacher. After all, today in the Kirghiz village nearly everyone has a secondary education, and there are even university degrees in the Kirghiz village to-

day, and Academician Sulaimanova is known throughout the country. It's strange to recall from this height that once upon a time a stable served as the school that Duishen repaired and made it fit for winter with the children's help, while the adults giped at them, and that he carried children in bad weather across the stormy stream on his own shoulders... Is it really worth remembering this school now when it has long since ceased to exist, and only a reddish hillock remains which is still called "Duishen's school" for some reason.

The reader will have a difficult time pinpointing words in the story that accuse people who reason in such a way. Even the relatively innocuous adjective "self-satisfied" belongs not to the author of the story, but to one of its characters. The writer's manner here is similar to a water-colour. There is neither irony, nor sarcasm, nor even anger, but rather a gentle sadness, a reproach sensed in the author's intonation.

But with what explosive power it is charged! And if the author speaks as if thoughtfully shaking his head, the reader reacts with more violent emotions. Having received a nudge, one's thoughts and emotions go beyond the immediate story told by the author. This may seem paradoxical, but I think that if Aitmatov had expressed his reproach more directly, fewer people would have related it directly to themselves.

The behaviour of some of Duishen's fellow villagers today and their attitude towards him is neither deliberate nor malicious. There is something else entirely different here. The writer, however, faithful to his manner, does not hasten to provide an answer. He slowly and carefully shows us the various nuances in people's condescending attitude to the Duishen of today.

He does this deliberately, and the few casual phrases that belong to the story's fleeting, nameless narrator, have greater force than the entire story of Altynai Sulaimanova's emotional evolution.

The words "once upon a time we were pupils, if anyone remembers, in Duishen's school. And yet he himself probably didn't know all the letters of the alphabet", spoken to the general laughter of those present, wound more deeply than a schoolgirl's fidelity or lack of fidelity to her teacher.

At the time that Chinghiz Aitmatov's story appeared, a common figure in literature, beloved of authors and their young heroes, was the older man—the reasoner and dogmatician, who tediously and capriciously, with or without a pretext, tactfully or tactlessly, preached to the younger generation and rapped them over the knuckles, criticising them for being spoiled, holding up his own virtues and those of his comrades-in-arms, as a reproach. These virtues were generally not understated by an author. They were given their due, but with a necessary dose of scepticism.

This dose of scepticism was regarded as a sign of maturity, and writers often won their young readers' sympathy in this way, for

these readers disliked all that was saccharine and falsely sentimental in literature. However, this is to go from one extreme to another. Now the idols are being knocked down from their pedestals: "And we took him seriously as a teacher."

In the village of today this sentence is spoken by an important guest, a man who is respected and modern in his views. But how similar it is to what Satymkul, the village "authority", said in the 1920s:

"You announce to the whole village, 'I'm going to open a school!', but look at yourself—you've got no fur coat, no horse to ride on, no land of your own..."

The same aplomb, the same certainty in one's superiority that is the hallmark of the limited man.

Satymkul is ignorant, while his "descendant" takes great pride in the fact that nearly everyone in the village has secondary or higher education. But true education is not just the ability to read and write. The most important element in this concept is the ability to respect a man, and there is nothing more difficult than to develop this ability in oneself, the ability to see and perceive human beauty, no matter how externally unremarkable it may be. We are not speaking, of course, about manners or politeness. Mankind had to travel a long and difficult path before it was able to write, "Man is a friend, comrade, and brother to man."

To respect a teacher is an ability that for some reason is more difficult to acquire than others.

If the author had acquainted us more closely with the Duishen of today, we might have discovered some familiar, unpleasant traits in him. He might have seemed querulous, quick to take offence, pompous, or on the contrary, morosely taciturn. But Aitmatov is opposed to this type of closeness, literally face-to-face, which prevents one from looking at the whole man and allows one only to look at some isolated point.

If the author had taken us directly up to the hero today, we would probably have learned, for instance, why Duishen did not enter the building where his outstanding fellow countrymen had gathered. Did he refrain out of sincere modesty or pride? Had he simply forgotten his favourite pupil, Altynai, whom he hadn't seen for such a long time, or had he taken offence at her? Was he justified, or was he just being cantankerous and envious, feeling himself insulted? One could endlessly guess at the reasons.

But this does not interest the writer, although he does not eliminate these aspects from the realm of possibility. Aitmatov's sense of tact tells him that the only true distance is that of respect. And so across the years Duishen's feat—his life—continues to shine brightly and evenly like a beacon.

A sense of purifying sadness remains with the reader for a long time, and yet the reason for this sadness is difficult to grasp. Do we

feel sorry for Duishen? If the story of the lonely postman had been told in another way, we might indeed pity him. Yet we are ready to envy, rather than pity Aitmatov's hero, his blazing convictions, his personal integrity, his inner beauty. Isn't this the reason for our sadness—that we are given something to envy, and that we only now realise this? Isn't our sorrow "radiant" because we have understood this, and because we believe that we shall live in a more interesting, joyful way with Duishen's image in our hearts?

Well done, Duishen!

The Story and the Film

Chinghiz Aitmatov's story *Duishen* was made into a film, "The First Teacher", by the young director Andron Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky, and this film was extremely popular. However, although the story was immediately accepted by all its readers, the film gave rise to fierce controversy. Swords were crossed over the question of whether Aitmatov's *Duishen* had been faithfully interpreted by the director. Opinions varied among the viewers.

Now, after many years, this controversy has naturally died down in the press, and has been forgotten for the most part. Each of the two works has taken its own place in the history of art and in the table of artistic ranks. If there is any need now to compare the two heroes, it is not in order to re-evaluate the film in retrospect, but to say a few more words about the image created by Aitmatov, and about those traits that emerged more clearly in the film's *Duishen*.

The originality of the film's *Duishen* is due, in my opinion, to the fact that the director approached his task both too literally and too freely. The joining together of such opposite tendencies—as it would seem—produced what is in essence a new image.

The action of Aitmatov's story takes place in our own day, when the teacher has grown old and even his pupils are practically grandmothers and grandfathers. *Duishen* the teacher takes shape before us through his fellow villagers' recollections. He is no longer a teacher now, but an old, sick postman who exists somewhere beyond the walls of the building in which the opening of the new school is being celebrated and his former pupil, Altynai, is being honoured.

Life's beginning and its unexpected summing-up. It is the constant interweaving of these two threads that produces that bitter-sweet sadness which determines our attitude towards *Duishen*. The main character in Aitmatov's story is, if you like, not *Duishen* the teacher, but the author's attitude, which gradually becomes our attitude, towards the *Duishen* of today and his fate.

Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky was attracted by the literal meaning of Aitmatov's work. The film's hero became a young fellow in the 1920s who is selflessly, nearly fanatically, dedicated to the new life